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Chemistry in Cream reunion, fiery energy from Ojos

Here are reviews of a selection of new music DVDs. The ratings are out of five stars.

Cream

Royal Albert Hall, London, May 2-3-5-6, 2005
Rhino

★★★★ The CD was a delightful surprise few could have predicted the musical chemistry that still drove rock's first power trio when they reunited after 37 years. The DVD adds much to the experience by showing the joy being shared on stage. Jack Bruce, in particular, seems to be having the time of his life, with bandmates Eric Clapton and Ginger Baker also sporting ear-to-ear grins much of the time. Sure, there are a few fluffed cues and a bum note here and there, but that only adds to the truth of this beautifully filmed and recorded document. The bonus features include alternate performances of three songs and short but enjoyable interviews with the group. Cream lovers will want to revisit this one often.
BERNARD PERUSSE

Tupac

Live at the House of Blues Death Row/Eagle Rock

★★★½ Blast from the past. Filmed two months before he was shot to death in September 1996, this captures fabled rapper Tupac at his boisterous, uncontainable peak as he performs one of his final shows, on L.A.'s Sunset Strip. His thrilling performance is followed by a set by Snoop Dogg and his Dogg Pound. At the end, Tupac returns to the stage. Before the pair play 2 of American Most Wanted, Tupac launches a venomous diatribe at his onetime friend Notorious B.I.G. Nine months later, they would both be dead. A fascinating glimpse of a rap legend in action at the height of hip-hop's coastal wars. Includes five Tupac videos.
TCHA DUNLEVY

The Flaming Lips

VOID: Video Overview In Deceleration 1992-2005
Warner Reprise Video

★★½ OK, enough with the mouth fetish, the giant rabbits and the cheesy homemade movie and early MTV look. Admittedly, there are a few intriguing ideas here, but none of the 19 video adaptations collected on this disc adds much to the songs, which are undeniably strong and better served by the stunning 5.1 Surround Sound remix. This year's Mr. Ambulance Driver opens the compilation and, as you go backward in time, the songs get more raw and the visual execution gets progressively lower budget and less interesting. The group commentary is also dull, ensuring a short shelf life for this collection.
BERNARD PERUSSE

Genesis

The Video Show
Atlantic/Rhino/Warner

★★★ Any reputation Genesis had as an MTV-savvy band rested on Land of Confusion, starring the grotesque Spitting Image puppets. Aside from that phenomenal 1986 clip, this comprehensive video compilation is most notable for exposing how many half-baked treatments were executed (invisible Tonch's rehearsal-space hijinks) and how many opportunities were missed (rarely a song as visually evocative as Home by the Sea deserved more than a straight performance clip). No Son of Mine is richly cinematic, Illegal Alien is riveting for its political incorrectness (just try wearing those Mexican getups in 2005), and Mama achieves the impressive feat of making Phil Collins look evil. But generally, one ends up wishing MTV was around back when Peter Gabriel was fronting the band in his fox mask.
JORDAN ZIVITZ

New Order

Item: A Collection & New Order Story
Rhino/WEA

★★★½ It's a two-disc celebration of the cult of no-personality, as the most influential band of complete nobodies in pop history have a case for their brilliance made for them. "Introverted hedonists" and purveyors of "the thinking man's dance music," they were reborn from the shade of a suicided singer. Now, for a band so insistent on privacy and aesthetic control, this is a remarkably revealing package. In two clips, Confusion and The Perfect Kiss, New Order forever de-romanticizes the video process. A Joy Division poster is visible over Bernard Sumner's shoulder in the studio, Peter Hook wears sweats. Then they re-romanticize it in memorable pieces celebrating the aesthetic tease: the metal mockery of "Touched By the Hand of God, the sci-fi clown suits of "Free Faith, the heartcrushing Waiting For the Sirens Call. Fittingly, a lot of this derives power through something we know that the naturalistic subjects do not. By the time of Crystal, they've come full circle, with the band replaced by young hipsters. Style = meaning, and they had a point. Along with 31 videos, there is a "Game Show" doc, interspersed with flattering/bitchy testimonials.
MARK LEPAGE

Body Count featuring Ice-T

SmokeOut Festival Presents Body Count featuring Ice-T
Eagle Vision

★½ Body Count dropped like a ton of bricks in 1992, when I saw Ice T's startling punk-rap-rock hybrid at Oakland Coliseum, opening for Metallica and Guns N Roses. The group's sound – keyed by guitarist Ernie C – was a crunching shock, furiously arresting amid the controversy over Cop Killer. This 40-minute concert takes place 11 years later at the Cypress Hill SmokeOut tour in bucolic San Bernardino before 60,000. Shot in "hi-def" – the usual pan-the-crowd, zoom-the-stage routine – it's basically DOA, a victim of age and appropriation. Ice-T plods onto the stage and bellows "You look like a bunch of pussies! Move your f—— ass!" but this tripe – riffs as innocuous as Nickelback – can't pull the trigger. "Masters of payback, inciters of chaos" – not! Toward the end, the songs sorta speak for themselves and all Ice (who's much more authentic as a screen actor) has to do is show up: Drive By, 22nd Game, There Goes the Neighborhood, Cop Killer. The taunts about sucking this and that sound as menacing as pro wrestling, the punk is pre-fab, the rage curdled. Ice flashes skills only on the lascivious cliché KKK B— , but Killer sounds puerile, ripe for some reality show.
JUAN RODRIGUEZ

Buddy Holly and the Crickets

The Music of Buddy Holly and the Crickets: The Definitive Story
Universal

★★★ It's a crying shame that there's so little surviving footage of Buddy Holly, one of rock 'n' roll history's most important figures. Even though the genius from Lubbock, Tex., was among pop music's first singer-songwriters and broke much new ground in the recording studio, we'll always have to make do with a few endlessly recycled live television clips. This 90-minute documentary – a mostly talking-heads affair featuring contemporaries like the surviving Crickets, the real Peggy Sue (Gerron) and others who crossed paths with Holly – does its best to tell the tragic story with few visual aids from Holly's peak years of 1956 to 1958. Also includes three lonely-looking TV performances in their entirety, extra interview footage and a well-chosen audio jukebox of 14 Holly classics.
BERNARD PERUSSE

Pink Floyd

In Their Own Words: Reflections on the Wall
Art House Classics

★ No one ever made rock-star whining as compelling as Roger Waters did with the Floyd epic The Wall in 1979, but the 72-page text that accompanies this slipshod history of the project is the only worthwhile part of the package. Unnecessarily spread over two discs, the unauthorized video presentation weighs in at just over two hours, with critics, a film lecturer and a record producer providing commentary in the absence of any participation from the group. Most interview clips with Floyd members are audio-only, forcing the viewer to watch endless footage of rolling tape or the same recycled still shots, while withheld rights result in two-obscure bands providing covers of the original songs for the sound track. Avoid.
BERNARD PERUSSE

Various Artists

"Festival"
Eagle Eye Media

★★★ The disappointing thing about Murray Lerner's otherwise excellent chronicle of the Newport Folk Festival, originally released to theatres in 1967, is that it provides no context and little commentary. Spread over three years (1963-65), performances are shuffled without any identification of time. Most viewers will also wish there was less fan atmosphere and more exciting footage of the all-star lineup, including Peter, Paul & Mary, Donovan, the Paul Butterfield Blues Band and Bob Dylan (with guitars, both acoustic and crowd-provoking electric). But for every colossal ruffle, like the camera staying on audience members during Howlin' Wolf's entire performance, there's a wonderful moment, like Son House's analysis of the blues juxtaposed with Mike Bloomfield's radically different perspective. Can you really go far wrong?
BERNARD PERUSSE

Ojos de Brujo

Touring Bari 2005
Dopella/Fusion III

★★★★ After providing one of the highlights of this year's Montreal International Jazz Festival, Barcelona's wild, mystic, funky flamenco collective Ojos de Brujo (Eyes of the Witch) release a live DVD that captures their multi-dimensional appeal. The group deftly mixes hip-hop, electronica, and Indian influences into a politicized Gypsy fiesta. Fiery lead singer Marina Abad exudes a bewitching ethereality, and her group is exhilarating. The live footage conveys the high energy and old world new world other world synthesis of the show. A 60-minute tour documentary gets at behind-the-scenes silliness.

And four dynamic videos point to an utterly original band that deserves to – and likely will – get much bigger.
TCHA DUNLEVY

The Beatles

From Liverpool to San Francisco
Eagle Media

★★ This 65-minute documentary, which contains not a note of actual Beatles music, uses newsreel and interview footage to provide a career overview – and a pretty pedestrian one at that. A few rarely seen clips will make this release interesting for collectors, but most of it is old-hat to Beatle-watchers. An extra feature, Beatles Across America, adds another 22 minutes to the disc's fairly thin content, and manages to recycle some material used in the main program. Still, as an on-the-spot piece about the scary fallout in the Bible-belt over John Lennon's "more popular than Jesus" statement, the bonus offering is pretty gripping stuff.
BERNARD PERUSSE

Rockers: 25th Anniversary Edition

MVD

★★★★ This low-budget chronicle of reggae culture in Kingston, a cult favourite, centres on drummer Leroy (Horsemouth) Wallace and his attempts to recover his motorcycle from organized-crime types. While this feature film includes highly amusing dialogue (helpfully subtitled), a delightful cast and several memorable scenes, the main attraction was always the killer soundtrack by the likes of Burning Spear, Gregory Isaacs and Junior Marvin, which runs pretty much throughout the movie. As if that weren't enough, this silver-anniversary update is full of extras, including 40 minutes of informative interviews with director Theodoros Bafaloukos, two videos, period promo material, video cast biographies and a priceless interactive Rasta patois glossary. Like The Harder They Come, it's a no-brainer for any reggae fan.
BERNARD PERUSSE

The Mamas & The Papas

California Dreamin': The Songs of the Mamas & The Papas
Hip-O/ Universal

★★★★ Were these hippie-era pop icons really with us for less than three years? It will be hard for those under 50 or so to fathom the extent of their omnipresence when chief Papa John Phillips was churning out the hits and wearing the spine-tingling vocal arrangements, but the footage in this one-hour documentary – mostly from television appearances – makes a believer of case for their presence in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. Surviving members Michelle Phillips and Denny Doherty reminisce, while Papa John provides his perspective via a 1986 interview. Bonus material includes extra interview material and three unedited performances, including the unreleased – and wonderful – Here 'tis My Arms. Only one complaint: like their career, it's over all too quickly.
BERNARD PERUSSE

Various Artists

Punk: Attitude
Capital Entertainment

★★★½ Brando, Chuck Berry, Jerry Lee, the MC5? Bowie? Who started punk? Filmmaker/Clash buddy Don Letts comes close to settling the issue with a two-disc set exploring punk's roots and its lengthening tendrils. From the corner of Rivington and Bowery through London brilliance and L.A. mediocrity, Letts captures some terrific moments. Enjoy priceless footage of Iggy Pop's famous peanut butter stroll on the hands of his audience, while talking heads Henry Rollins, Jim Jarmusch, David Johansen, Chrissie Hynde, Steve Jones and Bob Gruen offer slightly contradictory but always enlightening commentary (Chrissie: punk died when speed gave way to heroin; Henry: "As soon as mom knows how to say 'grunge', gotta go.") Includes a terrific Where Are They Now feature as well as an interactive Family Tree. Incidentally, think a musical DNA of The Who, Iggy Pop, and the Dolls, but it started with the Ramones in New York.
MARK LEPAGE

Lou Reed

Live at Montreux
Eagle Rock Entertainment

★★★★ Any jazz police ready to carp that Lou Reed didn't belong at the 2000 Montreux festival should go directly to the 15-minute versions of Rock Minuet and Tatters, in which the old grump has as much jazz in his veins as vitriol. Filmed during the tour for the Ecstasy album, the two-hour, 16-song set benefits from what was arguably Reed's hardest-driving band since the early 1980s. His fretwork reached new heights of corrosion on the tour and can't help but be blunted on home speakers, but the passion is there, the commitment is there, and – mercifully – tired chestnuts Sweet Jane and Walk on the Wild Side are not there. Superior to Reed's recent Spanish Fly DVD in terms of performance, cinematography and set list.
JORDAN ZIVITZ

Live at Montreux is in stores Tuesday.

Jerry Lee Lewis, Ronnie Hawkins, Carl Perkins

Let It Rock:
The 60th Birthday Concert
Eagle Vision

★★★ Ronnie Hawkins celebrated his 60th in style with a sizzling show at Toronto's Massey Hall. The 1995 concert has become legendary for featuring pioneers Jerry Lee Lewis – still vaguely menacing at 60 – and Carl Perkins. All three were at the top of their game, egged on by members of the Band and Jeff Healey, among others. While the performances are mostly great fun, the filmed version is often dragged down by clumsy editing and a camera crew that doesn't seem to know where to aim. An intermittently fascinating one-hour documentary, filmed this year, tries to add a larger context to the show, but ends up wildly unfocused. Insight? Well, something keeps coming up about rock 'n' roll being influenced by black music. Hey, who knew?
BERNARD PERUSSE

MC5

Kick Out the Jams
MVD

★ Those few who love them insist that the MC5 were the American detonation point for punk. Most others have barely heard of the putative rock revolutionaries, and any survivors were so busy gobbling fistfuls of questionable acid and jabbering about insurrection that they might barely notice this disclaimer: "with audio performances selected to complement the visuals." In other words, live footage of the band playing a poorly attended outdoor show has an arbitrary audio track slapped over it, along with psychedelic frookout lighting. The MC5, then, are the most poorly documented band of the era – no B-sides or vault hits here. Or may be that was all part of The Man's conspiracy. John Sinclair appears in bonus interview footage as a decrepit old beatnik belching after a hamburger, then gumming a Camel Light while his poetry drones over his semi-bitter commentary.
MARK LEPAGE

World Traveller Adventures

Uncivilized World/Koch

★★★ Four documentaries on ravers who "tried to make the difference," as it says on the DVD cover. The premise holds promise – British and French techno revellers pack up trucks and buses and make pilgrimages to Bosnia, India and Africa with starry-eyed humanitarian intentions. Unfortunately, two of the four episodes are plodding home-video footage of mundane travel logistics such as breakdowns and border-crossings. Storming Sarajevo is salvaged by a telling glimpse of the depressing post-war devastation of the late-'90s, and Mission to India demystifies the Goa party myth. But only the final film, African Expediasound, manages to convey the spirit of adventure and culture clash that the series aspires to.
TCHA DUNLEVY

The Ramones

Weird Tales of The Ramones
Rhino(Sire)/WEA

★★★½ "It wasn't always peaches and cream," says Joey Ramone, with holes in his socks. It still ain't. A lavish retrospective package attempts to set the record straight for the Ramones, but the video disc is hampered by the same old issues. Straitjacketed in personae, the Ramones didn't suit the putatively creative video format, and were badly served by the industry – no footage of Beat On the Brat, I Don't Wanna Go Down to the Basement, Sheena or Judy or Commando or Pinhead. Instead, you get relatively weak songs (Do You Remember Rock 'n' Roll Radio?, Something To Believe In) with poor conceptions, wrapped in a rockumentary with embarrassingly dated cameos. This, however, is one disc in a four-disc 85-song package featuring a comic book drawn by famed cartoonists Sergio Aragones, Bill Griffith and Xaime Hernandez. For the real visual story, seek out End of the Century.
MARK LEPAGE

The Kinks

1964-1978:
An Independent Critical Review
Classic Rock Productions

★★ How much hot air from journalists and session musicians can one take? Whatever the limit, it's sorely tested in this random critical analysis of key Kinks songs, which, for reasons unknown, jumps over important releases and stops dead in 1978. During its 97 minutes, oddly stretched over two discs, the unauthorized project offers no input from the Kinks but provides plenty of opinion from scribes you've never heard of. The rarely seen television footage, however, supplies one reason to own this – although more of that and less "enlightenment" from arm's-length observers would have been far preferable. A 50-page book that comes with the package is merely a disposable description of every alb- um track from the period covered by the video.
BERNARD PERUSSE

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